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PROMOTION, PROTECTION AND RESTORATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS AT NATIONAL, REGIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL LEVELS

PREVENTION OF DISCRIMINATION AND PROTECTION OF CHILDREN: HUMAN RIGHTS AND YOUTH

Written statement submitted by the International Federation Terre des Hommes, a non-governmental organization in consultative status (category II)

The Secretary-General has received the following communication which is distributed in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1296 (XLIV).

[31 July 1992]

GE.92-12930/0404K (E)

Children in armed conflicts

1. Armed conflicts often derive from what can be described as traditional causes, such as territorial claims or ideological factors. Nevertheless, they are also, and increasingly often, linked to a situation of economic unrest, social inequality and underdevelopment. According to two Hungarian and German researchers, there were 167 open wars, varying in intensity, between 1945 and 1986, most of them in the developing world. Since 1945, the western countries have been involved in many conflicts and there have been 10 wars within Europe itself. Both North America and Australia have been spared this scourge.

2. It is often repeated that it is children who are most frequently and most grievously affected by armed conflicts but this is one fact that will never be sufficiently publicized considering the immeasurable suffering that these conflicts bring into the children's lives. The International Federation Terre des Hommes therefore welcomes the decision taken by the Committee on the Rights of the Child to devote one day to discussing this question.

3. Many minors are compelled to carry weapons despite the international legislation in force. As mine detectors, messengers in enemy territory, conveyors of ammunition or food and fighting members of shock troops, they take part in conflicts from which they have little chance of emerging unscathed. The recruitment of minors is frequently linked to mass indoctrination and training programmes glorifying war. A sizeable proportion of the children recruited come from poor families living in rural areas. The decision to join the army, which is taken by the children themselves may also be rationally calculated to ensure a means of subsistence for themselves.

4. According to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, more than a half of the 17 million refugees with whom it is concerned are children and young people of school age. They are exposed to different forms of ill-treatment including sexual exploitation. The developing countries absorb the greater part of this flow of refugees, and this poses insoluble problems for economies that are already fragile. For this reason, the supporting facilities provided for many refugee children are far from satisfactory and these children consequently lose their most important years as far as education is concerned.

5. Modern war claims an ever higher number of civilian victims. During the Second World War, the proportion of civilians killed was 50 per cent; during the Viet Nam war, it rose to 80 per cent and during the Lebanese civil war it attained 90 per cent. Children, who represent the majority of the civilian population, naturally constitute the bulk of the victims. The fate of those who are wounded and who may remain disabled for life should also be recalled. In Cambodia, for example, in 1991, in three provincial hospitals, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) counted 1,057 mine injuries out of 4,552 admissions, 10 per cent of the injured being children under 14 years of age. In a hospital on the border with Thailand, for the first six months of 1992 out of 970 admissions the ICRC counted 596 mine injuries, 15 per cent of the injured being children under 14 years of age. In Peshawar, for the first six months of 1992, out of 930 hospital admissions the

ICRC counted 414 mine injuries, 10 per cent of the injured being children under 14 years of age. Lastly, in a hospital in Kabul, the number of persons injured by mines has increased considerably during the last three years, rising from 385 in 1990 to 572 in 1991, and 417 for the first six months of 1992. All of these figures cover only the minority represented by those who have access to a hospital where the ICRC is operating and more than a third of the persons injured by mines must undergo amputation.

6. Wherever violence and war are rife, children witness cruelty and sustain serious injury. They can be marked for life when they are separated from their parents and their families, imprisoned or see their homes destroyed. In a war situation, children learn destruction and violence, which encourages aggressive and brutal behaviour and prevents usual values of social life from being inculcated in them. In 1968, a study of Irish children revealed that in areas where acts of violence had been committed, psychological disorders and mental illnesses increased sharply. A similar study of children aged 3 to 9 years of age in Lebanon revealed that most of them talk about war continually and that more than a third of these children prefer war toys to any other kind.

7. Violence and armed conflicts also claim victims indirectly. The disorganization or interruption of supplies of food and medicine to the civilian population and medical care services is always followed by an increase in infant mortality. During the Gulf war, for example, children were the most hard-hit group. Their deaths were due not only to the bombing but also to their being unable to be transported to a hospital in time or to the destruction of canalization systems, which caused a proliferation of epidemics and intestinal diseases. In the territories occupied by Israel, many children are disabled from birth as their mothers were prevented from giving birth in a hospital because of a curfew or restrictions imposed by the army.

8. The movements that are members of the International Federation Terre des Hommes (IFTH) are not remaining idle before the distress of children who are victims of armed conflicts. Many of them support projects to rehabilitate children who have been traumatized by war. In Nicaragua, for example, one movement is supporting a project to assist war orphans by providing them with care and by training specialized personnel in mental health. In Mozambique, another is supporting projects to look after and provide psychological rehabilitation for children traumatized by war. The projects supported by the members of the IFTH are designed generally to improve the living conditions of children and their families. They can therefore be considered likely to mitigate social violence and underdevelopment which are such major causes of conflicts. 1/

Note

1/ Most of the information provided here is taken from a file published by Terre des Hommes-Schweiz, entitled "Enfants et guerre", which may be consulted.